

In the Land of Gods and Monsters

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Summary: Gotham is a town ruled by its underworld, and survival often means having to adapt to your environment. This is the story of one girl's fight to survive when she becomes the target of one of Gotham's most brutal assassins.

In the Land of Gods and Monsters

She was on stage when they walked through the doors the dimly lit, smoke filled bar. They were only outlines from the light of the stage but she recognized one the outlines and by association could have guessed the other six that piled in behind him. His hunched figure and unique walk gave him away, even when his face was hidden in the shadows. Penguin was here. Her boss had not mentioned to expect the odd crime lord, so she figured this could not be good.

Rusty's was a rundown dive bar on the south side of Gotham. They sold liquor and beer out the front door; guns, drugs, and women out the back door. It certainly was no standup establishment, but on the grand list of Gotham criminal havens it was low on the totem pole. The clientele was mostly no name muggers, a few fire starters, and possibly a few one and done murderers, nothing compared to some of the hot spots around town. Lila had been singing at Rusty's for a handful of months and had only heard the name Penguin in passing. A henchman of his would show up once a week and collect his "fair share" of the measly proceeds and be on his way. The man himself never stepped a toe in the joint to her knowledge. But here he was, limping his way angrily through the crowd. He was given a wide berth and he needed it for the burly entourage that followed.

Lila crooned into the microphone, her eyes watching the outlines with interest, but her voice carrying the notes of the old, sad blues number home. The group was headed for Rusty's 'office', a glorified broom closet behind the stage. The closer they came the more Lila could make out their faces. She recognized a few of them, including Penguin, from the small number of times she sang at Fish Mooney's

club. Although back when she would moonlight at Mooney's Penguin went by a different name, Oswald Cobblepot she believed it was, but Penguin was a much different person than Oswald.

With the number of enforcers following behind him, this was definitely bad news. Lila held out the last note of the tune while Sam, her faithful piano playing partner tinkled the ivories. She ended the song with a slight bow and a murmured thanks. They were set to play two more numbers but Lila was less than surprised when one of Penguin's hulking body guards climbed on the stage, grabbed the microphone and bellowed into it for everyone to beat it.

"Rusty's is closin' early," he rasped angrily over the sound of agitated moans from the audience as they lumbered to their feet.

Sam grabbed the tip jar and his sheet music and made for the back door with Lila not far behind. However, their exit was blocked by another bulky bodyguard.

"Not you guys. Anyone workin' here stays."

Lila glanced nervously at Sam, who simply shrugged, slammed the tip jar and music sheets down and flopped into the nearest seat. He had worked for Rusty since the beginning and had seen more than his fair share.

Lila stood behind Sam, biting her nails. The bar quickly emptied except for the goon squad and Rusty's employees. It was a rough looking bunch of people to be sure but if there was going to be a fight Lila had a feeling she would be on the losing side.

Rusty finally emerged from his office, looking sweatier and sleazier than ever. Penguin led the man out into the center of the bar, where everyone could see and hear whatever it was he came to say.

Though he was smaller than all of his bodyguards, Rusty, the door men, and half of the bartenders, everyone stared uneasily at the dark haired man in the middle of the room. He was pale, and Lila found him a little fragile looking, but his notorious temper and cunning were what made him so dangerous.

"It seems," he began with a smile, "that some you," he emphasized the word by turning to look at everyone around him, "believe your loyalties lie elsewhere. And I have come here tonight to assure you they do not." His cane made a dull 'thump' on the worn, wooden floors as he glanced around. "Your little watering hole for the dregs of society exists because I allow it to. You ****all**** earn your paycheck because I allow you to. It is my protection and good faith that keeps this fine establishment running."

Lila's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. What did he mean? Were some of her coworkers working for someone else? It was entirely possible. No honor in a den of thieves after all.

"I'm not a bad man, but I am a business man," his smile, though unchanging, seemed to get more sinister with each word, "and if I hear any disloyal talk, I can promise you, you will all regret it. Do I make myself clear?"

Heads nodded silently, and though Lila had no clue to what he was

referencing she nodded too. He may have well declared that two plus two equaled five, but with the heavily armed and intimidating group of men behind him she and the rest of the 'dregs' would have agreed to just about anything.

"Excellent." He turned his attention to the bar's owner, "Now I believe we need to have a conversation about your protection fees."

Rusty ran a dirty, sweat soaked handkerchief over his balding head. Penguin turned and limped to a booth by the bar.

Lila turned to Sam who just shrugged and grabbed his gear to leave.

"Umm excuse me," the sound of fingers snapping called Lila's attention to the booth in back, "you two can stay. I think I'd like a little music."

It was obvious how much he enjoyed the power to demand whatever he wanted when he wanted it.

Lila glanced at Rusty briefly before giving a slight smile and a nod.

"Of course."

Sam heaved his way back up to the stage and behind the aging upright piano. The bench whined as he took his seat. He licked his fingers and flipped through his book of sheet music.

Lila took her spot behind the microphone, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. She eyed what was left of the crowd as the familiar tinkling of the keys filled the air. Sam was playing one of her favorites. It was a sad and slow Billie Holiday number.

Lila crooned mournfully into the microphone. From the stage she could see Penguin talking and Rusty sweating. Her eyes swept the rest of the now diminished crowd. There were your average dumb brutes, men with more muscle than brains, and then there was Butch, a man with slightly more brains but just as much muscle, and lastly there was Zsasz.

Victor Zsasz was a name that would rightly send chills down the spine of any Gothamite with even the slightest knowledge of Gotham's seedy underworld. He was an assassin by trade and hobby. He killed for both work and for fun, and he marked each hit with a tally mark on his body. He was the boogeyman, an urban legend, the thing that went bump in the night.

Though she had heard many things about Victor Zsasz she was happy to say that until this day she had never been unfortunate enough to find herself in his company. He stood, straight backed, and ready to strike. He was tall, lean, bald, and dressed in all black; his beloved pistols holstered, but ever ready. He scanned the crowd, vigilant and perhaps eager for his next tally.

Lila's attention was pulled back to booth by the bar. From the stage she could see Rusty pleading, no doubt trying to weasel his way out of paying any more in protection fees, but Penguin looked unmoved,

and eventually he held his hands up, putting an end to the conversation. Rusty looked dejected as he slid out of the booth and stomped his way to the bar, returning to the table with a bottle of whiskey. He 'graciously' poured his boss a glass and then raised his own, toasting their partnership. Lila admired his restraint as she was certain he wanted nothing more than to break the bottle over Penguin's head. The bar owner downed his glass in one gulp, but Oswald sipped his cautiously, as if it was poison.

Oswald clapped politely as Lila held out the last note of the song. He mumbled something to one of his bodyguards before waving the singer over to the booth. Lila briefly looked to Sam, as if he could save her somehow, but he was already making his way off the stage and to the backdoor. With a forced smile, Lila made her way to the back of the bar. She felt the eyes of Penguin's deadly entourage on her as she walked past.

"That was beautiful, really," he grinned, but the twinkle in his eyes made Lila nervous. "I've heard you sing before though, I believe," he paused, "At Mooney's?"

It was a question but he already knew the answer.

Lila swallowed hard and she felt a wave of panic sweep through her. Did he think she was working for Fish? If so she was as good as dead. She could hear footsteps behind her, and when she glanced back she noticed Victor Zsasz had made his way over and was standing a little too close for comfort.

"Yes sir," she answered weakly.

"Interesting," he mused.

Lila's brow furrowed in confusion.

"I mean look at this place. Compared to Fish's it's a hovel." He was still smiling but there was accusation dripping from every word.

She understood what he was suggesting now. It was an easy assumption to come to, after all who in their right mind would leave such a high profile club for Rusty's dive.

Lila wasn't sure if it was paranoia but she was almost certain she heard the safety of Zsasz's gun being switched off.

"I'm sure you know better than anyone, Mr. Cobblepot, that Fish Mooney was not exactly the most trustworthy of bosses."

Oswald laughed.

"And you find this man, Rusty, more trustworthy?"

Lila looked to her boss. He was dabbing his forehead with his dingy handkerchief.

"No," she answered apprehensively. She paused before continuing, knowing what she wanted to say but not wanting to lose her life or her job in the process.

"But Rusty's not exactly criminal mastermind," she eyed her boss

cautiously. He pursed his lips and gave a light harrumph but he couldn't didn't the truth. "When Rusty stabs you it'll be in the front, but with Fish...she would stab you in the back and smile in your face the entire time."

Since she didn't feel the barrel of a gun against her head Lila continued.

"I just want to earn a paycheck doing what I'm good at without feeling like a pawn on a chess board."

Oswald nodded.

"What do you think Rusty? Surely you know your help better than anyone," he barely hid the contempt in his voice as he clearly enunciated every syllable.

Rusty leaned back against the booth, the vinyl of the seat crackling behind him.

"Ehh, Lila's a good girl," it sounded like the words had to struggle to free themselves from his gullet. "I don't think she's your mole boss." He ran a hand over his forehead before slamming back another glass of whiskey.

Oswald considered him for a moment before turning back to the singer in front of him. He studied her, silently scrutinizing every inch.

Lila swallowed hard. Her pulse raced and she prayed that Penguin believed Rusty.

"I could take her home with me if you'd like. Shouldn't take long to get the truth out of her."

Lila almost jumped out of her skin when Zsasz spoke. She hadn't realized how close the hit man was standing until she felt him gently stroke her arm with his the back of his hand.

She felt the blood drain out of her face. Even Rusty grimaced.

But Penguin waved his hand, dismissing the suggestion.

"I don't think that will be necessary Victor."

He stood, straightening his sport coat as he stepped out of the booth.

"We'll find out who the mole is, one way or another," he sneered as he limped passed Lila.

"We'll be in touch _Rusty_."

Victor turned to follow his boss.

"Shame," he murmured lowly, giving Lila a wink when she glanced nervously up at him.

The thump of Penguin's cane echoed throughout the empty bar, and Lila was suddenly aware that she and Rusty were the only people left in

the bar besides Penguin and his men.

Rusty and Lila sat in silence until the slam of the front door signaled the men's departure.

"Fuck me," Rusty grumbled coarsely pouring himself another glass of whiskey and sliding Oswald's unfinished whiskey towards Lila.

Lila slunk down into the booth and took the whiskey, knocking it back without a word.

Rusty filled the glasses once more.

"What the hell is going on?" Lila asked, staring down the brown liquor in front of her.

The man sighed, his elbow propped on the table, holding his glass haphazardly in front of him.

"Someone's been tipping off what's left of Maroni's gang. We've lost two big gun sales just this week to 'em."

"So what does that mean?"

Rusty gave her an exasperated scowl.

"It means that if I don't figure out who's running their fucking mouths we'll all be out on the street, and that's best case scenario." He swirled the liquor in his glass. "Worse case? I'm sure you can guess."

He drained the glass once more, slammed it down on the table and stood to leave.

"So what do we do?" Lila asked, her voice raising a few octaves.

"We find the mole," he grumbled, as if stating the obvious.

He lumbered back in the direction of his office, mumbling obscenities under his breath.

"And in case you're thinking of ditching work, don't. It'll make ya look guilty," he called from the back before slamming the door of his office.

End
file.